
1. WHAT IS PRAYER?

In today's talk, we shall look at what we think prayer is.

Take a moment to think about what you personally think prayer is:

Here are some views of prayer down the ages. Which (one or two) do you like most?

1. Prayer is coming to know God better as I open myself to him
2. Prayer is chatting to God throughout the day
3. Prayer is giving my worries to God and receiving peace in return (Phil. 4v6-7)
4. Prayer is to stand before God with your mind on your heart
5. Prayer is moving God to act for human benefit
6. Prayer is to bring the light of the divine presence within us ... to come face to face with the one who dwells even now within our innermost self
7. Prayer is bringing my needs and anxieties to the Cross of Christ and leaving my burdens there
8. Prayer is keeping my relationship with God alive and lively
9. Prayer is the work of the Church best expressed in its services

All of these are valuable aspects of prayer. Each one of us values some more than others. The aim of this course is to extend the range of options available to you, so that, by trial and error, you will find new ways to enliven your praying.

God delights in our praying. He understands us and loves us just as we are. We don't need to use 'posh' prayers from books, or to say 'the office' regularly; we can just be ourselves in God's presence and speak and listen as we wish.

Sometimes in prayer, words are completely unnecessary because God knows what we need before we ask: And sometimes we cannot express anyway what we really want or need [See Romans 8 v 27-28].

Prayer is the 'glue' which keeps our relationship with God close. [Handclasp analogy based on John 14v20]. We shall return to the idea of prayer as relationship with God in another session.

A good prayer life involves more listening than speaking (60:40 is about right). It is about being prayerful, rather than saying your prayers, though saying familiar prayers like the Lord's Prayer can be very comforting.

In the weeks ahead we will explore more elements of the rich tapestry which is prayer.

SUPPLEMENT 1

In these 'supplements', there will be items which you may pursue on your own. They are again designed to extend your boundaries of praying.

STANDING BEFORE GOD WITH THE MIND ON THE HEART

This style of prayer has a long tradition in the Eastern Orthodox church, having its origins in St Theophan the Recluse. He writes:

"So long as the Christian prays with the mind in the head, he will still be working solely with the resources of the human intellect, and on this level he will never attain to an immediate and personal encounter with God. For there can be no direct knowledge of God without an exceedingly great love, and such love must come not from the brain alone but from the whole man – that is, from the heart. It is necessary then for the Christian to descend from the head into the heart. He is not required to abandon his intellectual powers – the reason too is a gift from God – but he is called to descend with the mind into the heart.

"The head seeks God, but it is the heart that finds him."

MEDITATION: THE WALLED GARDEN

Settle in a quiet and comfortable place and close your eyes. Think about a beautiful walled garden.

You unlock the door in the wall and enter. You close the door behind you and lock it. Now you are safe and protected. It is your private place of sanctuary with no-one to bother you.

The garden is cultivated with beautiful plants. Smell the flowers. Hear the distant birdsong. Enjoy the warmth and the beauty around you.

You notice that some things need your attention: what do you need to do... [silence]

You reach the garden seat and sit down. It's a lovely place to sit for a while.

Then you realise that Jesus is sitting quietly next to you, enjoying the peace of the garden with you. You begin quietly to talk to him about what is bothering you... [silence]

He smiles at you, and you feel your burdens lifted.

Slowly you wander back to the doorway in the wall and unlock it with the key, which only you have. You exit the garden and safely lock the door again. What happened is safely hidden from all but you.

As you return to the business of daily life, how do you feel after your walk in the garden?

Will you go there again?